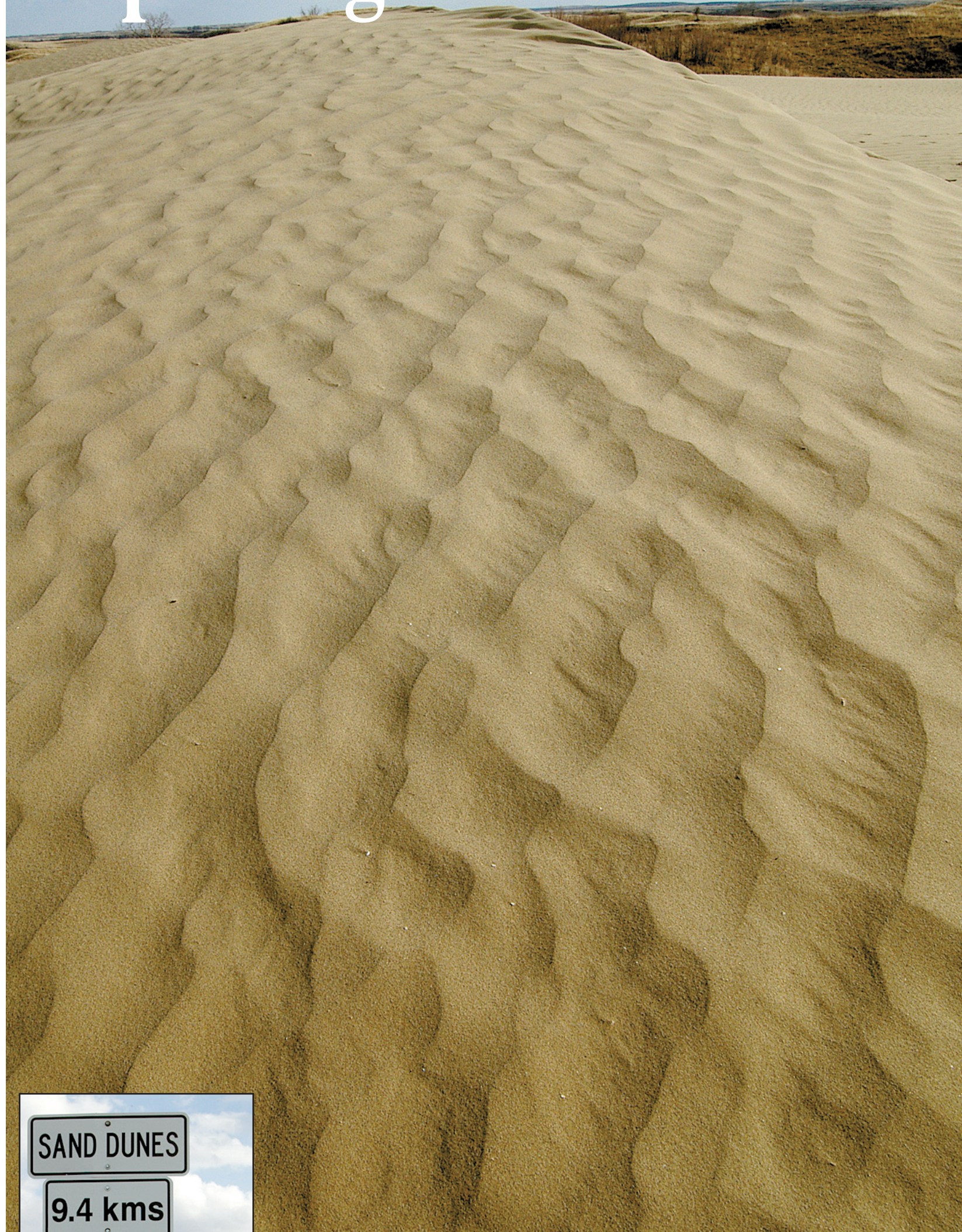


Exploring Nature's Great Sand Box



A Sunday afternoon with plenty of time to spare—a detailed map combined with plenty of patience—means that the reader can get to these awesome sand dunes that dominate part of the Saskatchewan prairie north of the Cypress Hills and south of the South Saskatchewan River—just across the south-eastern border of Alberta.



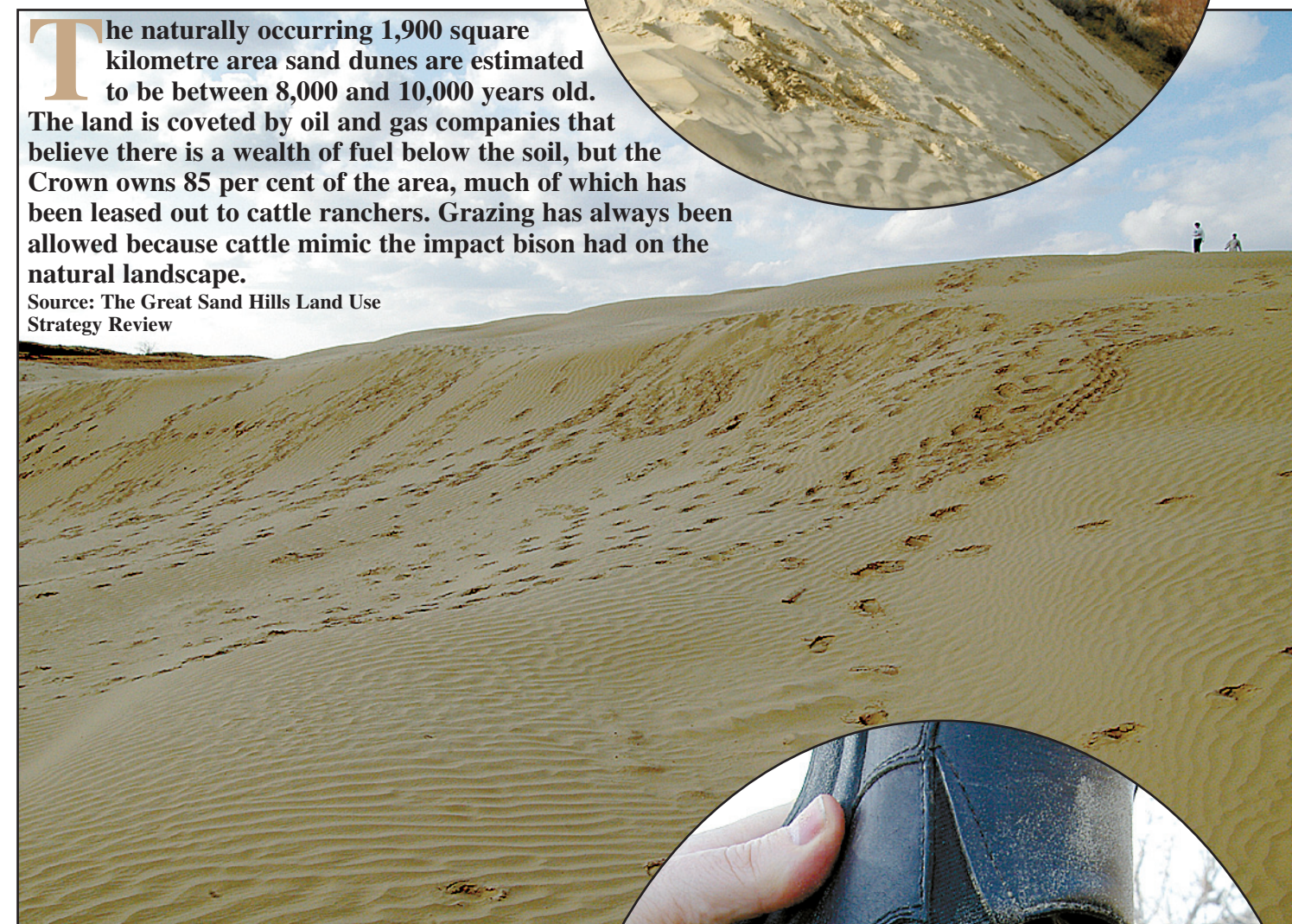
Bushes (top) and trees are swallowed up as shifting winds cover—and then uncover anything in the path of the tons of sand. Photo far right shows the edge of one dune, demonstrating the sheer size of the hills. Circle picture shows a car at the bottom of one of the dunes.



The naturally occurring 1,900 square kilometre area sand dunes are estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000 years old. The land is coveted by oil and gas companies that believe there is a wealth of fuel below the soil, but the Crown owns 85 per cent of the area, much of which has been leased out to cattle ranchers. Grazing has always been allowed because cattle mimic the impact bison had on the natural landscape. Source: The Great Sand Hills Land Use Strategy Review



The massive hills are home to a variety of species, including those considered internationally to be rare, threatened and endangered— such as Ferruginous hawk, Burrowing owl, Great Plains toad and Ord's kangaroo rat. It is also home to mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse and pronghorn antelope, which feed on sagebrush.



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A sign out in the middle of seemingly nowhere (left), leads a driver down a sandy beach-like road that winds for miles. Suddenly a larger sign, right, appears at one of the entry points letting the visitors know that the area is a protected ecosystem. A paleoenvironmentalist from the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Dr.

Alwynne Beaudoin said on Friday night, July 16 in Provost that these sand grains were left over from the last ice age, and they were likely re-activated by a huge drought that took place in the 1790s. Sand dunes at Bodo, now revealing artifacts, may be related to this larger system shown on these pages.



Tracks will survive—maybe the day (left), but immediate attention is usually required by hikers, draining shoes at the largest complex of open dunes in Canada—next to the Athabasca Sand Dunes in

northern Saskatchewan. It is the largest native prairie in the province and one of the six largest remnant grasslands on the glaciated Great Plains of North America.